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SUBJECT: SERBIA: MIXED MESSAGES ON CEKU NOMINATION

REF: A. A) PRISTINA 172

[1](#)B. B) PRISTINA 187

Classified By: Amb. Polt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: While the Serbian government declared publicly that Agim Ceku's nomination as Kosovo's prime minister is "unacceptable," in private conversations with poloffs, government officials have been much more practical and indicated a "wait-and-see" approach to gauge how the new premier will affect ongoing talks on Kosovo's final status. End Summary.

Public Rejection of Ceku's Appointment

[1](#)2. (U) The government's press office director, Srdjan Djuric, said yesterday that the appointment of Ceku to any public office was "unacceptable" to the Serbian government. Djuric emphasized that Serbia had issued an international arrest warrant for Ceku on charges of genocide against Serbs in Kosovo. President Tadic told the press that while Serbia does not choose Kosovo's premiers, he did not think it was a good idea for "former warriors" to become political leaders and he hoped the nomination would "not cause a destabilization of the entire region and jeopardize the Serb ethnic community in Kosovo." Sanda Raskovic-Ivic, chair of the Coordination Center for Kosovo (CCK), was the first to comment publicly on the change in Kosovo leadership on March 1, calling the move a signal that Kosovo Albanians were becoming radicalized and were turning away from compromise.

[1](#)3. (U) Most Belgrade media reported the government's negative reaction to the nomination, emphasizing Ceku's alleged involvement in war crimes against Serbs. Several articles mentioned that Ceku had been arrested twice, first in Slovenia, then in Hungary, based on his international arrest warrant. However, besides the independent daily Danas, the media did not carry the story on their front pages. Glas carried the story on page 3 under the headline, "Terrorist to Head Kosovo Government," accompanied by a large photo of Ceku in uniform. Vesti also carried the story on page 3 with the headline, "Premier With a Warrant" and a short biography of Ceku. Tabloids also noted Serbian Radical Party leader Tomislav Nikolic's call for "no communication with the criminal Ceku."

More Practical Private Message

¶4. (C) Privately, government officials offered a more tempered and tentative reaction. Aleksandar Simic, advisor to Prime Minister Kostunica, said his government would withhold judgment and wait to see how Ceku would affect the talks on Kosovo's final status. Speaking to us before Djuric's comments were published, Simic ventured that the government would not even react publicly. An advisor to President Tadic, Damjan Krnjevic-Miskovic, suggested that Ceku would be a "more competent" premier than Bajram Kosumi, and called it a smart political move for the Kosovo Albanians to choose Ceku. While it may be hard for Serbs to sit across the table from a war criminal, he said, Ceku's hardliner reputation may work to the Serbs' advantage. Only a hardliner such as Ceku could afford politically to grant concessions to Serbs. Krnjevic-Miskovic also said his government would withhold judgment until it becomes clear how prepared the new premier will be for compromise.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Despite the government's strong public statements against Ceku's nomination, it is important to note the difference between Belgrade's public and private messages. The latter reinforce our view that Belgrade is intent on staying at the negotiating table and will wait to make a practical assessment of how Ceku's appointment will affect the talks.

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